RICHMOND School of Arts & Sciences

University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

English Faculty Publications | English

1993

Dismantling Stereotypes: Interracial Friendships in Meridian and A Mother and Two Daughters

Suzanne W. Jones
University of Richmond, sjones@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications

Part of the Gender and Sexuality Commons, and the Race and Ethnicity Commons

Recommended Citation

Jones, Suzanne W. "Dismantling Stereotypes: Interracial Friendships in Meridian and A Mother and Two Daughters." In *The Female Traditions in Southern Literature: Essays on Southern Women Writers*, edited by Carol Manning, 140-57. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Suzanne W. Jones

Dismantling Stereotypes: Interracial Friendships in *Meridian* and *A Mother and Two Daughters*

> For various reasons, the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America. His revelation to the public is the thing needed to do away with that feeling of difference which inspires fear and which ever expresses itself in dislike.
>
> —Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print"

> We must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each other's difference to enrich our vision and our joint struggles.
>
> —Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex"

When pondered together, these meditations on difference raise some perplexing questions. How do we discover a shared humanity without erasing difference? How do we use difference to enrich our vision if we fear it? How can we come to understand difference differently? When Zora Neale Hurston wrote "What White Publishers Won't Print" in 1950 before the civil rights movement began, she believed literature could help reduce white prejudice by proving blacks to be "just like everybody else" (171). When Audre Lorde called for new patterns of relating across differences at Amherst College in 1980, she ended her powerful plea with lines from an unpublished poem, "we seek beyond history/for a new and more possible meaning" (358), lines that suggest the power and importance of imaginative literature in producing change. Currently Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writing when racism is once again on the rise, continues to insist on the power of language to shape perception:

"Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference.... we carelessly use language in such a way as to *will* this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations. To do so is to engage in a pernicious act of language, one which exacerbates the complex problem of cultural or ethnic difference, rather than to assuage it or redress it" (5). Several contemporary Southern novelists are attempting to assuage and redress this complex problem in their fiction, to deal with difference in the way Audre Lorde calls for. I am limiting my discussion to two novels written by Southern women after it was obvious that desegregation, in and of itself, would not eliminate prejudice—*Meridian* (1976), by Alice Walker, and *A Mother and Two Daughters* (1982), by Gail Godwin. I am interested in the literary techniques they employ to dismantle the stereotypes of Southern womanhood produced by the patriarchy of the Old South—stereotypes that persisted after the Civil War ended slavery and after the civil rights movement ended legal segregation. Both Walker and Godwin imagine shared experiences for their black and white characters, calling attention not only to their common interests and common humanity but also to other similarities that the South's preoccupation with racial differences overshadowed: gender and class. Walker and Godwin do not attempt to erase difference so much as to assure that difference is not misread or misnamed, to show that it is not biologically determined but culturally conditioned.

Recognition of any similarities between black and white women has been rendered difficult in the South by a history of slavery and segregation, which caused blacks and whites to define themselves in opposition to each other, to see difference as innate rather than socially constructed. Though not representative of the majority of Southerners, the white plantation society, because of its economic and social dominance, established conventions of behavior for women, both white and black.[1] The white woman was expected to be a "lady"—physically pure, socially correct, culturally refined, and dutiful to family. Lower-class white women were less-refined, more hardworking versions of this same ideal of the dutiful wife. In contrast, plantation society defined black women as promiscuous wenches, prolific breeders, hardworking mules, or nurturing mammies. Irving H. Bartlett and C. Glenn Cambor contend that "each image was paradoxical and something far less than that of a mature, autonomous, and well-integrated woman" (19). The white "lady" was deprived of her full sexual and maternal identity while the black woman was deprived of her equality and her humanity. Literary critic Minrose Gwin argues that "just as black women were forced to be strong, white southern women often were compelled to appear weak" (4). Even though these racial stereotypes were inaccurate, as historians

Catherine Clinton, Paula Giddings, and Anne Firor Scott have shown, they have affected black and white women's images of themselves as well as their images of each other. Psychologist Mark Snyder has observed the power of stereotypes to become self-fulfilling: "In interracial encounters, racial stereotypes may constrain behavior in ways to cause both blacks and whites to behave in accordance with those stereotypes" (266). He also points out that when people have adopted stereotypical ways of thinking about another person, they "tend to notice and remember the ways in which that person seems to fit the stereotype while resisting evidence that contradicts the stereotype" (266).

The difficulty of realizing that racial differences are socially constructed rather than biologically determined is evident from the following passage of Mary Chestnut's Civil War diary. An aristocratic white woman, Chesnut can see the brutality of slavery, but the ideology of plantation society blinds her to the fact that it is the system that degrades the female slave, rather than the female slave who is naturally inferior:

> Under slavery we live surrounded by prostitutes, yet an abandoned woman is sent out of any decent house. Who thinks any worse of a Negro or mulatto woman for being a thing we can't name? God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system, a wrong and an iniquity! Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. . . . My disgust sometimes is boiling over. Thank God for my country women, but alas for the men! They are probably no worse than men everywhere, but the lower their mistresses the more degraded they must be. (21)

Such reasoning, the literary critic Hazel Carby argues, was part of the nineteenth-century ideology of Southern womanhood, which held that the white man was "merely prey to the rampant sexuality of his female slaves" (27). This dichotomous thinking shows not only that stereotypes falsify the causes of behavior but that they are also used to bolster self-esteem.

For years white women have defined themselves in opposition to their black sisters, but black women have done the same. One hundred years after Chesnut confessed these strong feelings, Toni Morrison wrote an article for the *New York Times Magazine* rightly questioning the relevance of the women's liberation movement for black women and proudly affirming her identity as a black woman by delineating the differences between the races. She reminisces about a trip to Charlotte, North Carolina, where she was struck by the "accuracy and fine distinctions" of the labels "White Ladies" and "Colored Women" on

bathroom doors: "The difference between white and black females seemed to me an eminently satisfactory one. White females were *ladies,* said the sign maker, worthy of respect. And the quality that made ladyhood worthy? Softness, willingness to let others do their labor and their thinking. Colored females, on the other hand, were *women*—unworthy of respect because they were tough, capable, independent and immodest" (15). Morrison's perspective allows her to question the ideology of Southern womanhood and to reverse its positive and negative attributes. The following description, however, still bears evidence of stereotypical thinking:

> Black women have always considered themselves superior to white women. Not racially superior, just superior in terms of their ability to function healthily in the world. . . . Black women have no abiding admiration of white women as competent, complete people. Whether vying with them for the few professional slots available to women in general, or moving their dirt from one place to another, they regarded them as willful children, pretty children, but never as real adults capable of handling the real problems of the world.
>
> White women were ignorant of the facts of life—perhaps by choice, perhaps with the assistance of men, but ignorant anyway. They were totally dependent on marriage for male support (emotionally or economically). They confronted their sexuality with furtiveness, complete abandon or repression. (64)

While Morrison emphasizes significant differences in the social experiences of the races, she does not take into account the differences between white individuals, based on other factors such as class.

Throughout this one hundred-year period, some Southern women writers, both black and white, have attempted to undermine racial stereotypes by depicting a common bond between black and white women. In *Black and White Women of the Old South* Gwin has pointed out that this bond was often based "on an acknowledgement of common womanhood and common humanistic values" (24). This bond,[2] however, was never depicted as one of friendship and equality. Because of the times in which Alice Walker and Gail Godwin live, they are able to push further than their literary foremothers in imagining relationships between black and white women. Each creates a protagonist who discovers not only some similarity but the individuality in a woman of a different race. Then, each becomes better able to understand the other's difference. In Walker's *Meridian,* a Southern black civil rights worker, Meridian, discovers that a Northern white coworker, Lynne, is not simply a superficial white girl looking for adventure but a hard worker, just as committed to the movement as Meridian is. In Godwin's

A Mother and Two Daughters, Lydia, a genteel young white "lady," enrolls in a women's studies class at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and discovers that her black sociology professor, Harvard-graduate Renee, shares her own tastes and interests. The black writer, then, has her black protagonist realize that racial difference is not a matter of simplistic opposition, and the white writer has her white protagonist make the same realization. Thus the struggle that each main character has in overcoming racial stereotypes reflects the struggle that each writer imagines is the experience of readers of her own race. But readers whose race is not the same as the author's also gain knowledge about the complex functioning of racial stereotypes. For example, in reading *Meridian* many of my white female students were surprised by Meridian's biased opinions about white women, a discovery that made them think differently about themselves and their interactions with black women.[3]

The 1960s' civil rights movement brought black and white women together in the South as equals for the first time. In *Meridian,* Alice Walker explores such a relationship between Lynne and Meridian. Despite their liberal politics both women at first have difficulty relating to each other as individuals; both are preoccupied with racial difference.

Although Lynne does not think of blacks as inferior to whites (she ardently supports equal rights and marries a black man), she is preoccupied with race. Lynne feels guilty because she is a representative of the race that discriminates against blacks, so she treats them as special people. Walker suggests that Lynne's fascination with blacks is a romantic response to a people and a way of life different from her own:

> To her eyes used to Northern suburbs where every house looked sterile and identical even before it was completely built, where even the flowers were uniform and their nicknames were already in dictionaries, the suburbs incapable of strong odor or surprise of shape, and the people usually stamped with the seals of their professions; to her nestled in a big chair made of white oak strips, under a quilt called The Turkey Walk, from Attapulsa, Georgia, in a little wooden Mississippi sharecropper bungalow that had never known paint, the South—and the black people living there—was Art. (130)

Such a romantic view involves perceiving the exotic otherness of blacks, seeing them as objects rather than awarding them the full dignity of human beings with emotions and thoughts. Certainly, the blacks who had known the squalor and degradation of living in the sharecropper's shack that Lynne describes did not find it quaint, nor did they call the

house a "bungalow." Instead of denigrating difference as Southern whites had, Lynne romanticizes it. Captivated by the differences between the races and blinded by her belief that all blacks are passive sufferers, Lynne fails to recognize the differences that exist between black individuals: "She had insisted on viewing them all as people who suffered without hatred; this was what intrigued her, made her like a child in awe of them" (162). Consequently, Lynne does not see the rage of black men like Tommy Odds, who feels powerless under white oppression. Nor does Lynne notice the anger of black women like Meridian, who has lost her boyfriend to a white woman.[4]

Misunderstandings arise on both sides because of racial difference. Walker suggests that Meridian's inability to understand the attraction her boyfriend Truman feels for Lynne originates from the black woman's feeling of sexual superiority over the white woman, the feeling that Toni Morrison described in her *New York Times Magazine* article. Although Meridian had originally liked Lynne and appreciated her liberal politics, Meridian is bewildered when Truman, the handsome black man whom she has been dating, shows an interest in Lynne. Because of this triangle, Meridian is forced to confront her prejudice against white women. She realizes that her mother and grandmother had taught her "that nobody wanted white girls except their empty-headed, effeminate counterparts—white boys.... As far back as she could remember it seemed something *understood:* that while white men would climb on black women old enough to be their mothers—'for the experience'—white women were considered sexless, contemptible and ridiculous by all" (107). This stereotype breaks down, however, when Meridian applies it to Lynne. Although at first Meridian rationalizes Truman's interest in Lynne as a fascination with her color, Meridian is forced to acknowledge that the attraction is much more complex. In her analysis of the novel, Barbara Christian suggests, "Because [Truman] is an intellectual as well as a man, he expects his mate to be worldly as well as virginal" ("Novels" 223). A pregnant teenager forced by school authorities to drop out of high school, Meridian does not have these qualifications.

Meridian, however, likes to think of black women as women who did "something unheard of. Outrageous" and white women as "frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy and without ingenuity.... useless except as baby machines" (108). Actually as Walker presents the facts of Lynne's and Meridian's lives, she inverts the stereotypes. In her teenage marriage to Eddie, Meridian resembles the white women she derides: "she knew she had lacked courage, lacked initiative or a mind of her own" (109). And Lynne, rather than conforming to Meridian's narrow notion

of the white woman's fate, more nearly fits Meridian's image of the black woman, who escapes from her family and home town to do something adventurous, "to become something unheard of" (109). Although her motives are far from pure, Lynne leaves home and parents to work for the civil rights movement during a violent time in Southern history. She marries Truman, bears a child by him, and is subsequently disowned by her parents.

While Walker shows how race can separate women, she uses gender as one similarity to unite them. The brutal slaying of Lynne's daughter Camara brings the two women close together. As Lynne and Meridian mourn the death of Camara, whom they both loved, they begin to relate to one another as women, rather than as white or black. Both have experienced the loss of a child. Both have experienced the loss of Truman, who expressed his racial and sexual insecurity by breaking up with Meridian when the civil rights movement made white women more accessible and by leaving Lynne when the "Black is beautiful" movement made black women more desirable than white. Watching a television program in Lynne's New York apartment about the strain of race relations in the South, Meridian and Lynne feel that they have "temporarily solved" the race problem. Meridian reads Margaret Walker's poems to Lynne, Lynne attempts "to cornrow Meridian's patchy short hair," and they talk "intimately, like sisters" (173). During this time in New York they ask forgiveness of each other, acknowledging the harmful stereotyping that fosters hatred between the races.

But resolution does not come so easily. Society's stereotypes lie latent but potent in the consciousnesses of all of Walker's characters. A year later Lynne, still in love with Truman, tracks him to Meridian's house in Georgia. Although Meridian is not sexually involved with Truman, he continues to visit her. Lynne, in an attempt to hurt Meridian and to boost her own self-esteem, explains Truman's behavior by using racist cliches:

> "Tell me, how does it feel to be a complete *flop*" (this said with a Bette Davis turn of her wrist) "at keeping your men?"
>
> "You know, I could—yes, fat ass 'n' all, walk up the street anywhere around here and Hey Presto! I'd have all y'all' men following after me, their little black tongues hanging out." (150)

After Truman leaves, Lynne apologizes to Meridian, saying she has insulted her out of jealousy. Her motives are more complex. Walker suggests that overcoming hatred of "the other" first requires overcoming hatred of self.[5]

Rejecting white racism, Lynne has tried to reject her whiteness and has allied herself with black people, but she finds herself the victim of black prejudice, as the rape by Tommy Odds and the ensuing rejection by Truman prove. The rape episode dramatizes Walker's concern with the tenacious hold stereotypes have, even on people who know they are false. Lynne's experience with Tommy subsequently causes her to generalize that all black men are "savages" (161) and in doing so to dredge up a stereotype that lies not very far beneath her liberal activism. Ironically, then, Lynne's initial romanticism of blacks leads to the racism that denigrates them. In attempting to protect Tommy Odds from white injustice by not telling the police, Lynne has not made Tommy responsible for his actions, and she has unwittingly encouraged him to think stereotypically about her. For in Tommy's eyes Lynne becomes both the Northern liberal who "felt sorry for me because I'm black" (164) and the stereotypical white woman who secretly desires a dark-skinned lover—"She didn't even fight. She was just laying back waiting to give it up" (163).

Despite attempts to perceive each other without racial stereotypes, both Lynne and Tommy are trapped within the stereotypical images their society has promoted, images that render them incapable of responding to each other as distinct individuals. Furthermore, stereotypical thinking about "the other" transforms Lynne into a stereotype herself. For example, after the rape and subsequent sexual relationships with black men, Lynne perversely enjoys the resulting rage of black women, and she uses their rage

> as acknowledgement of her irresistible qualities. It was during this time that whenever she found herself among black women, she found some excuse for taking down and combing her hair. As she swung it and felt it sweep the back of her waist, she imagined she possessed treasures they could never have. She began to believe that men fucked her from love, not from hatred. For as long as they did not hate her she felt she could live. She could bear the hatred of her own father and mother, but not the hatred of black men. And when they no longer came to her—and she did not know why they did not—she realized she needed them. (166)

No longer a member of either the white or the black community, Lynne feels very much alone, and she envies Meridian her place and her purpose in life: " 'It's just that you have everything. I mean, you're so strong, your people love you, and you can cope. I don't have anything. I gave up everything for True and he just shit on me' " (151). To try to figure out her problem, Lynne reviews her life. When she tells Meridian

about the rape, the bond that Lynne feels should have been there between the two women is strained. Race interferes. It is significant that Walker has the usually saintly Meridian react so insensitively here, saying that she cannot listen to such a story, much less believe it.

Meridian's difficulty in listening to Lynne arises because Lynne's story is too much like the stories white women traditionally told about being raped by black men, men who were never allowed to tell their own stories. Meridian defensively believes that white women have always lied about black men raping them. But Lynne tells Meridian her story anyway. And Alice Walker makes sure that both sides get told—the white woman's and the black man's—devoting separate chapters to each viewpoint. For only in the telling of each side can readers, both black and white, understand that though the behavior may appear stereotypical, the motives are more complex. Tommy does not rape Lynne out of lust, as the old white myth might purport, but out of rage—at white racism, at having his arm shot off by white bigots. Lynne does not allow him to take advantage of her because of the white woman's desire for the black man, as stereotypical thinking would have it, but because of guilt for being a member of the race that has victimized him and fear that he will not get a fair trial if she cries rape.

The significance of Walker's use of interracial rape as a pivotal point in the relationship between black and white women in *Meridian* can be better understood by considering the short story, "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells," which Walker completed while she was writing the novel. Like Meridian, the black narrator of this story is pulled between two parts of her identity—being black and being female. The narrator (presumably Walker herself) refers to writing about interracial rape in a novel and begs to be forgiven by fellow black woman Ida B. Wells, who investigated some of the so-called rapes that led to lynchings during and after Reconstruction. Wells became convinced that the majority of these "rapes" had actually been affairs between consenting adults (Sterling 60–117). In the story, Walker's narrator says that "whenever interracial rape is mentioned, a black woman's first thought is to protect the lives of her brothers, her father, her sons, her lover" (93). The narrator explains "that a history of lynching has bred this reflex in her. . . . I grew up believing black men literally did not rape white women" (93–94). Like Meridian, the narrator is forced to confront her prejudiced beliefs when her white roommate and friend, Luna, confesses something she has told no one else—that while working in the civil rights movement down South, a black man had raped her.

Like the narrator in "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells," Walker rebels against Wells's imaginary injunction to "write nothing" that will

be used against black men ("Luna" 94). Instead, in *Meridian* she writes with sensitivity and complexity about an episode potentially damaging to black men. Perhaps Walker has her characters confront what she calls "the stumbling block" ("Luna" 101) of interracial rape because she hopes the time has come when both black and white versions of the story will be "unprejudicially heard" ("Luna" 102). Certainly in her novel she creates the "solidarity among black and white women" ("Luna" 102) that she says is so rare.

The understanding to which Meridian and Lynne come is born out of storytelling. Through telling her story to Meridian, Lynne realizes that her tendency to romanticize blacks has led to misunderstandings. Furthermore, memories of the white prejudice a New York Jewish family encountered when they moved South force Lynne to reflect on her own ethnicity, and she realizes that her religious group has been victimized as well as the black race, although certainly not in the same way. Her conclusion that "black folks aren't so special" (181) is evidence of her growing awareness of self and "other." Just as Lynne begins to see some of her self in "the other," Meridian does also: equating the oppression of blacks with that of Jews. Meridian's remark, "maybe . . . the time for being special has passed" (181), is a signal of her ability to accept blacks and whites as individuals. Finally she views Lynne as a person, not simply as a white woman. Walker insists that whether this sense of being special results from a tendency to romanticize differences or to criticize them, it causes one race to misunderstand the other and to dehumanize individuals in the process.

The humor with which Walker concludes Lynne's storytelling is hopeful because the women are able to make fun of the racial stereotypes that they have too long guarded so closely:

> "Good God, this [talk of oppression] is depressing," said Lynne. "It's even more depressing than knowing I want Truman back."
>
> "That *is* depressing," said Meridian.
>
> "Oh, I know he's not much," she said. "But he saved me from a fate worse than death. Because of him, I can never be as dumb as my mother was. . . . No, Truman isn't much, but he's instructional," said Lynne. "Besides," she continued, "nobody's perfect."
>
> "Except white women," said Meridian, and winked.
>
> "Yes," said Lynne, "but their time will come." (181)

In *Meridian* and in "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells," Alice Walker suggests that listening to each other's stories helps to loosen the hold that stubborn myths and harmful stereotypes have had on the imaginations of both black and white women. Walker seems to agree with

Barbara Christian that to listen to another's stories or to read them is "not only to validate the self but also to participate in 'the other's' view of the world" (34).

Gail Godwin sets her novel, *A Mother and Two Daughters,* in North Carolina about fifteen years after the 1960s civil rights movement. Lydia, one of the two daughters of the title, is a 1980s version of the nineteenth-century Southern lady. Graceful, modest, refined, and well-mannered, she has devoted her life to her husband and children. When the novel opens, Lydia fits the stereotype that Godwin described in her 1975 *Ms.* article, "The Southern Belle": "soft hands and soft voices; first concern for others, not self; refusal to dwell on subjects of ugliness, unpleasantness, violence, tension, strife; suave short-circuiting of all 'embarrassing questions'; cultivation and veneration of traditional and beautiful things; impeccable manners; 'spotless reputation' " (52). But in fulfilling this role, Lydia has not been fulfilled. To find another self hidden behind the social mask, Lydia leaves her husband and her home and returns to college, where she discovers sociology, feminism, and a black friend, Renee.

Establishing a friendship with Renee plays a central role in Lydia's break with traditional Southern values and in her emerging sense of self, although the interracial friendship is not as prominent in Godwin's novel as it is in Walker's. Lydia's thrill in telling her sister Cate about her new friend comes as much from the fact that Renee is highly educated as from the fact that she is black. Cate, an English professor, has mercilessly criticized Lydia's country-club friends as superficial and her suburban life as trivial. But Lydia considers her new friend as evidence of the reverse—of her widening horizons and of her growing interest in a life of the mind. When she explains the impact her friendship with Renee and Renee's friend Calvin have had on her life, Lydia reveals her previous racial prejudice. She says she used to assume that all robbers and muggers were black and that all victims were white. Now she resents the "bad publicity" (482) that an individual black criminal brings to the race. While Lydia has yet to realize that the "bad publicity" comes not from individual blacks who commit crimes but from whites who see such behavior as a sign of racial inferiority, she is learning that all blacks are not alike by getting to know two black individuals.

In contrast to the relationship between Lynne and Meridian, which emerges after a long struggle, there is little conflict between, or within, Lydia and Renee as they become friends. In part the ease of developing their friendship, despite Lydia's racial prejudice, has to do with their

positions in life. Lydia, newly separated from her husband, is eager to prepare for a career; Renee, a Harvard graduate about to have her first book published, has a successful career. So Lydia sees Renee, who is also younger than she is, as a role model, a woman to admire: "Renee's office door was open. She was sitting at her desk, reading an aerogram with an English stamp and smoking a little brown cigar. Framed by shelves full of glossy books and wearing a twill pantsuit with a low-necked cerise silk blouse, she was the advertiser's dream-image of the woman who has 'made it' " (145). Godwin chooses the details carefully here. They not only reflect the worldly working woman dressed for success but also counter the Southern white stereotype of the black woman. The books, aerogram, and slim cigar indicate that Renee is hardworking, educated, and sophisticated. Lydia is fascinated by Renee because she has never met an upper middle-class black woman. Indeed, Lydia acknowledges Renee's "superiority over her in many of the areas the world values" (158). In this pairing of white and black women, Godwin inverts the traditional Southern racial hierarchy by making the black character superior to the white.

A more significant factor in establishing their friendship as well as in emphasizing similarities between the two women is that their tastes and values are alike, something Lydia discovers when Renee asks her home to lunch. In Renee's home Lydia finds a similarity in tastes: a gray frame house on a "genteel old street" (149), rooms filled with plants and antiques, damask napkins and cut glass. In Renee's conversation Lydia discovers, to their mutual delight, a similarity in interests: French cuisine, sociology, children, the nature of love, the significance of social classes, snobbery. Race is not an issue in their friendship, though social class certainly is. Lydia feels neither hidden guilt, as Walker's Lynne does, nor a desire to confirm liberal views, either of which might cause her, as a white woman, to seek a friendship with Renee *because* she is black.

Godwin uses the relationship between Lydia's mother's friend Theodora and her black maid, Azalea, as a contrast to the friendship between Lydia and Renee. Godwin underlines the generational change in Southern race relations by juxtaposing Lydia and Renee's lunch with a luncheon Theodora gives the same day. Lydia's mother Nell describes it this way: " 'There the three of us sat around the dining table, me and Theodora and Wickie Lee. And Azalea sat in the kitchen having *her* lunch. Theodora spent most of the time hollering back and forth with Azalea, and Wickie Lee and I sat in silence, picking at our shrimp salad' " (158–59). This brief scene depicts both the inequality and the irony of relationships between black maids and their white employers

in the South. The conversation between Theodora and Azalea reveals that they have more to talk about than Theodora and her two white friends. When Wickie Lee deserts Theodora, it is Azalea, and not her white friend Nell, whom Theodora goes to for comfort. Yet Godwin makes her readers painfully aware that Theodora's relationship with Azalea is patronizing and self-centered. In giving Azalea her old clothes and jewelry and having her move into the house with her, Theodora appears generous. But such gestures are easy to make; they do not signify friendship, as Azalea understands:

> [Theodora] said to Azalea, "The old order changes, Azalea. Why, look at us. Who would ever have thought you and I'd be coughing each other to sleep on the opposite sides of our wall?"
>
> Azalea gave Theodora a level look. "You perfectly capable of winning any argument all by yourself, Miss Thea, but you know and I know there's still that wall." She settled back in her chair with a dark smile, looking for all the world as if *she* had won. (580)

Unlike Theodora, Lydia is conscious of the racism that still exists in the interracial relationships in Southern society. Thus she is proud of the difference between her relationship with Renee and Theodora's relationship with Azalea. And yet for Lydia, the only embarrassing moments in their friendship come when she is reminded that Renee is black, a difference she no longer thinks about. Godwin indicates that similarities in feminist politics and social class have made Lydia forget about racial difference. But Godwin has Renee remind Lydia of this difference. Renee uses the word *nigger* in class, and she frequently drops her refined Southern drawing-room drawl and turns on her down-home Southern black dialect. Renee enjoys slipping into black dialect because the use of the two languages allows her to assert both similarity and difference. Lydia can only equate such language with Azalea, and yet at first Lydia cannot equate Renee with Azalea, even though they have the same skin color. However, Renee's continued use of Azalea's language makes Lydia conscious of the difference in skin color and therefore heritage between herself and her friend, at the same time that Lydia has decided there is no difference.

At first Lydia avoids this issue. Seeing class similarities between blacks and whites has allowed her to move beyond racial stereotypes. She does not want to consider racial differences. Eventually Renee's language switch catches Lydia off guard, and she giggles at the contrast. Like Meridian and Lynne, Lydia and Renee end up laughing together. But they indirectly acknowledge difference rather than directly confront it the way Meridian and Lynne do. There is a mannerliness about their

relationship that does not exist in the relationship between Lydia and her sister Cate or between Meridian and Lynne. Lydia and Renee's friendship is much like the one Godwin imagines in her essay "The Southern Belle" between a black woman and her white friend who would probably hesitate to ask "embarrassing questions" (85). Lydia remains too much of a polite Southern lady to ask Renee embarrassing questions. However, as Lydia becomes more at ease with difference, she becomes more comfortable with Renee, and she expresses an interest in Renee's family history.[6] Godwin implies that only after black and white Southern women discover some similarities will they be able to begin to understand racial differences, not as innate or uniform, but as variably conditioned by a variety of social and cultural experiences.

Even though Renee may dress and act a part that previously few black women had filled, she transcends any stereotype, white or black, as Lydia's observation shows: "There was something wickedly arrogant about it, when Renee did it [drop into black dialect], as if she were showing her listeners that, though she was equally at home in both worlds, she was actually above both" (129). Godwin does not want readers to mistake Renee for a black woman trying to act white, a mistake Lydia's sister Cate makes when Lydia first tells her about Renee and Calvin. Cate too easily equates their upward mobility with insensitivity to racism and to the plight of their own race. Renee's teaching techniques and her decision to become a civil rights lawyer prove Cate's view false.

In the course of the novel, Godwin further dismantles racial stereotypes by having Lydia discover that in addition to Renee's having traits Lydia has thought of as "white," Lydia herself has characteristics she has attributed only to blacks. Her marriage to Max has lacked sexual passion, a characteristic she has stereotypically equated with the black race. On a vacation to New Orleans with Max the year before, she had hoped they would be freed from their "tight, civilized" lives by "some Negro playing a saxophone" (274), but "not the faintest throb of the jungle drum beat in their veins" (275). After her separation from Max, Lydia finds sexual passion with a podiatrist named Stanley, but she has difficulty integrating this newly discovered part of her self into the old definition of the Southern lady. To Lydia a lady is not a lover; she is an "amiable bed partner" (268). For a while Lydia tries to compartmentalize her life (mother, student, respected friend of Max, secret lover of Stanley), deciding that if she is a lover in private, she can still be a lady in public. Eventually though, the contents of one compartment of her life spill into another, and she is forced to come to terms with all parts of her self. She discovers that the passion of "the other" is in some respects a repressed part of her self.

In *Black and White Women of the Old South,* Gwin argues that in the nineteenth century women of both races, bound by dualistic thinking, "often viewed one another as missing pieces of a female identity denied them by the patriarchal culture. Female narrators of the slave narratives reveal their yearning for the chaste respectability of their white sisters, while the diaries and memoirs of the white women show their intense jealousy of the stereotypical sexuality of the slave woman. Each is only one half of a self" (11). In *A Mother and Two Daughters,* Gail Godwin brings these two halves together in both Lydia and Renee. At the same time that Godwin confers sexuality on Lydia, she gives Renee upper middle-class respectability with all its virtues and flaws. When Renee speaks derisively of the lower class whites who could not appreciate the weimaraner that she bought from them, Renee shows that upper middle-class blacks can be as snobbish as upper middle-class whites.

By the conclusion of *A Mother and Two Daughters,* Lydia feels in some ways "closer to Renee than to her own sister" (397). As testimony to this friendship, Godwin ends the novel with a symbolic marriage. Lydia's son Leo marries Renee's daughter Camilla, who Cate says is just like Lydia. At first, despite her new racial awareness, Lydia is shocked by the prospect of an interracial marriage in her own family, but she quickly acquiesces when she forces herself to think of Camilla as an individual. For as Carolyn Rhodes has noted, "The concept of the lady in the South of 1984 (the date of the epilog) has been quite detached from concern with color, although not from beauty and grace and demeanor. Camilla, the bride, impresses her white mother-in-law as 'a perfect lady' and the matriarchal Aunt Theodora agrees" (64).

If Gail Godwin's ending seems too pat and idealized, it does not totally depart from realism. In a traditional comedic resolution the harmony between a man and a woman symbolizes a larger harmony within the society. In Godwin's novel, however, the harmony that exists between black and white individuals is not extended to racial groups. Racism still exists in her fictional Southern world, though it is relegated to the background: a woman in a supermarket says she pities the children that Leo and Camilla will have, the Klan still marches in Greensboro, Calvin's life is threatened and he heads north, and the prejudiced white father of a "D" student in Renee's class firebombs her house and kills her dog. And yet the reader is not left without hope. Stereotypical thinking exists in Gail Godwin's world but not between blacks and whites who know each other personally.

Neither Godwin nor Walker suggests that interracial friendships will eliminate prejudice between groups, nor do they subscribe to "the

mystical belief that the category 'woman' is the most natural and basic of all human groupings and can therefore transcend race division," a phenomenon that Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis warn against in *Common Differences* (40). Although Godwin's portrait of the dynamics of interracial friendships is not as satisfyingly complex as Walker's, both writers suggest that if black and white women would only listen to each other's stories and find out about each other's lives, perhaps we would discover similarities that might allow us to better understand differences, as well as give us common goals. Both Gail Godwin and Alice Walker try to provide readers with such an experience through these novels. They make what we felt was strange about "the other" more familiar at the same time that they challenge our own sense of self. By imagining, as Audre Lorde calls for, some new "patterns for relating across our human differences as equals" (355), Alice Walker and Gail Godwin enable us to see that unity need not depend on homogeneity nor difference mean separation or simplistic opposition.

NOTES

1. See Anne Goodwyn Jones, *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859–1936,* for an excellent summary and analysis of historians' speculations about the origins of these stereotypes (9–13). They range from the importation of the Western patriarchal tradition from Europe to racial slavery as an institution, to Southern anxieties about societal order before and after the Civil War, to white male anxiety about miscegenation.

In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist,* Hazel Carby argues that ideologies of white womanhood rigidified at the same time that the miscegenation laws were extended and importing slaves was outlawed: "That the slave followed the condition of his or her mother necessitated the raising of protective barriers, ideological and institutional, around the form of the white mother, whose progeny were heirs to the economic, social, and political interests in the maintenance of the slave system" (30–31).

2. In *Within the Plantation Household, Black and White Women of the Old South,* Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that although nineteenth-century black and white women shared emotional intimacy, they did not share a "sisterhood" because race and class were more important in their relationship than gender. While some critics have thought that the evidence Fox-Genovese cites suggests otherwise, Carby agrees with Fox-Genovese that "the social relation of slavery, which the ideology mystified, determined that the interests of the mistress lay with the slave master, not with the slave" (31).

3. For a discussion about race and reading, see Minrose C. Gwin's "A Theory of Black Women's Texts and White Women's Readings, or . . . The Necessity of Being Other" and Barbara Christian's "Response to 'Black Women's Texts.'"

4. In "Women's Consciousness and the Southern Black Movement," historian Sara Evans discusses the historical causes that underlie Walker's fictional event: "Interracial sex was the most potent social taboo in the South. The struggle against racism brought together young, naive sometimes insensitive, rebellious and idealistic white women with young, angry black men, some of whom had hardly been allowed to speak to white women before" (240). In *When and Where I Enter,* journalist Paula Giddings explains the racial conflicts within the civil rights movement this way: "The presence of white female students brought another, and sometimes emotional, dimension to the organization's sexual tension [between black men and women, struggling uneasily to share power in the movement]. The significance—and even the number—of interracial liaisons varies according to whom one talks to, but in an organizational context the weight of sex/race history was bound to be explosive" (296).

5. In "Stereotypes: Conceptual and Normative Considerations," Judith Andre explains that a "stereotype—which we retain in the face of contradictory evidence—must function in one of the following ways: it may be relatively fundamental to our conceptual scheme; it may protect our self-esteem; it may help bring about some desirable situation; or it may shield us from facing an unchangeable, unpleasant fact" (259).

6. See Elizabeth Schultz for another view of Godwin's representation of the relationship between Renee and Lydia. In "Out of the Woods and into the World: A Study of Interracial Friendships between Women in American Novels," Schultz reads Renee's absence in the epilogue as evidence that "when race does become an issue the friendship wanes" (75). However, Godwin explains Renee's absence by her enrollment in law school, and in no scene between the two women does Godwin imply a cooling off of the friendship.

WORKS CITED

Andre, Judith. "Stereotypes: Conceptual and Normative Considerations." In *Racism and Sexism.* Ed. Paula S. Rothenberg. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. 257–62.

Bartlett, Irving H. and C. Glenn Cambor. "The History and Psychodynamic of Southern Womanhood." *Women's Studies,* 2 (1974): 9–24.

Carby, Hazel. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of Afro-American Woman Novelist.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Chesnut, Mary. *A Diary from Dixie.* Ed. Ben Ames Williams. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Christian, Barbara. "Novels for Everyday Use: The Novels of Alice Walker." In *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980. 180–238.

——— "Response to 'Black Women's Texts.'" *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 1, no. 1 (1988): 32–36.

Clinton, Catherine. *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South.* New York: Pantheon, 1982.

Evans, Sara. "Women's Consciousness and the Southern Black Movement." In *Speaking for Ourselves.* Ed. Maxine Alexander. New York: Pantheon, 1977. 232–45.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes." *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 1–20.

Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America.* New York: William Morrow, 1984.

Godwin, Gail. *A Mother and Two Daughters.* New York: Avon Books, 1983.

———. "The Southern Belle." *Ms.* 4 (1975): 49–52, 84–85.

Gwin, Minrose. *Black and White Women of the Old South.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985.

———. "A Theory of Black Women's Texts and White Women's Readings, or . . . The Necessity of Being Other." *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 1, no. 1 (1988): 21–31.

Hurston, Zora Neale. "What White Publishers Won't Print." In her *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing.* Ed. Alice Walker. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1979. 169–73.

Jones, Anne Goodwyn. *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859–1936.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981.

Joseph, Gloria I., and Jill Lewis. *Common Differences.* Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1981.

Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." In *Racism and Sexism.* Ed. Paula S. Rothenberg. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. 352–59.

Morrison, Toni. "What the Black Woman Asks About Women's Lib." *The New York Times Magazine* 22 August 1971: 14–15, 63–64, 66.

Rhodes, Carolyn. "Gail Godwin and Southern Womanhood." In *Women Writers of the Contemporary South.* Ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984. 55–66.

Schultz, Elizabeth. "Out of the Woods and into the World: A Study of Interracial Friendships between Women in American Novels." In *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition.* Ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. 67–85.

Scott, Anne Firor. *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Snyder, Mark. "Self-Fulfilling Stereotypes." In *Racism and Sexism.* Ed. Paula S. Rothenberg. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. 263–69.

Sterling, Dorothy. *Black Foremothers.* New York: Feminist Press, 1979.

Walker, Alice. "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells." In *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981. 85–104.

———. *Meridian.* New York: Washington Square, 1976.